USING MEDICINES SAFELY

A Prevention® Magazine/Council on Family Health Report
from research by Louis Harris & Associates, Inc.

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Introduction

Most Americans use both over-the-counter and prescription medicines periodically. Are they taking these medicines safely? Do they read and understand the labels, or are these labels a source of confusion and indifference? Do they know how to protect themselves against tampering?

This report looks at several issues related to the safe use of medicines: whether people read and understand the labels, if--and where--they seek help when they don't understand, and if they are aware of potential problems regarding medicine expiration dates, tampering, and use of other people's prescription drugs.

Information in this report comes from a telephone survey conducted for Prevention Magazine and the Council on Family Health by Louis Harris & Associates, Inc. Interviews were conducted with 1,256 adults in the continental United States during November, 1991. Results are projectable to the nation as a whole.

For further details about the study, see "Notes on Survey Methods," p. 15.

Study Highlights

The overwhelming majority of people who use over-the-counter (OTC) medicines read and understand the labels.

* Of the 152 million Americans who take OTC drugs, nine of every 10 say they read the information on the labels.

* Most label reading takes place at the initial purchase (97% say they read it) and at first use (93% say they read it).

* Of those who read OTC medicine labels, 87 percent say they usually understand what they read. Just 12 percent report a problem grasping the information.

* The primary source of help for those who don't understand OTC labels are pharmacists (71% ask them), family members (15%) and doctors (10%).

Most people who buy prescription drugs take the appropriate steps to use them carefully.

* Eighty-seven percent of Americans say they buy prescription drugs, and nearly 90 percent of them read the labels on their medicine.

* Although 89 percent of those who read labels on prescription medicines say they understand them, women, people with some college experience, and those in households with annual income above $50,000 have the highest scores for understanding.

* For those who don't understand the labels on prescription drugs, doctors are the best source of help for 43 percent, followed by pharmacists (38%) and family members (18%).

Among people who use medicines, there is a high level of understanding about safety issues.

* Seventy-seven percent of adults say they always (53%) or sometimes (24%) check drug expiration dates on medicine labels. Of those who check these dates, 91 percent report that they discard expired medicines.

* More than 90 percent of those who buy OTC products say they know what to look for as evidence of tampering, and nine in 10 check their medicine for signs of this.

* Eighty percent claim they have never used another persons' prescription drugs, while 20 percent say they have done so at least once in the past five years.

Over-the-Counter Medicines

Eighty-two percent of American adults--about 152 million people--say that they use over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Fourteen percent use them often, 35 percent occasionally, and 34 percent rarely. Seventeen percent say they never use them.

Women and people over the age of 50 are most likely to use these medications regularly. Sixteen percent of women take them often, compared to 11 percent of men. And 17 percent of people over 50 take them often, compared to 11 percent of those under age 50.

OTC label reading

Of people who buy OTC drugs, nine out of every 10 say they read the information on the labels. Ten percent say they do not read these labels.

This high level of label reading extends across most demographic groups. For example, people who never finished high school are just as likely as college graduates to read labels, and people in households with annual income below $25,000 have similar scores to those in $25,000+ households.

The minor exceptions are men, and people aged 50 to 64. Fourteen percent of men who use OTCs don't read the label, compared to six percent of women. And 15 percent of people aged 50 to 64 ignore the OTC label, while just nine percent of those under age 50 or over age 65 do so.

Most label reading takes place at the initial purchase or use of an OTC medication. Ninety-seven percent of those who read labels say they usually read them when they purchase a medi-

cine for the first time; 93 percent say they usually read them when they are ready to use the medicine for the first time. In addition, fully two-thirds of this group report that they usually read the label **every time** they purchase an OTC medicine.

Understanding OTC labels

A huge share (87%) of those who read OTC medicine labels say they usually understand what they read. Just 12 percent report some problem with understanding.

Groups who have the most difficulty understanding OTC labels include those aged 65+ (17%), those without a high school diploma (27%), and those in households with income below $35,000 per year (15%).

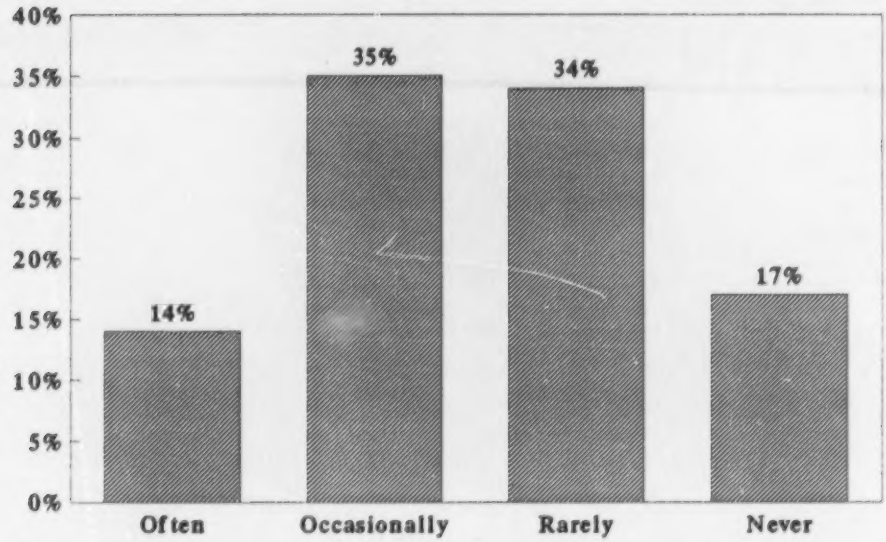
When they don't understand the OTC label, 71 percent of adults ask for help, while 29 percent do not. The primary sources of help are pharmacists (71% ask them), family members (15%), and doctors (10%).

While most people who don't understand labels are willing to ask for help, some groups are particularly reluctant to speak up. People least likely to request assistance include Westerners (56% seek help), men (65%), and those aged 65+ (50%).

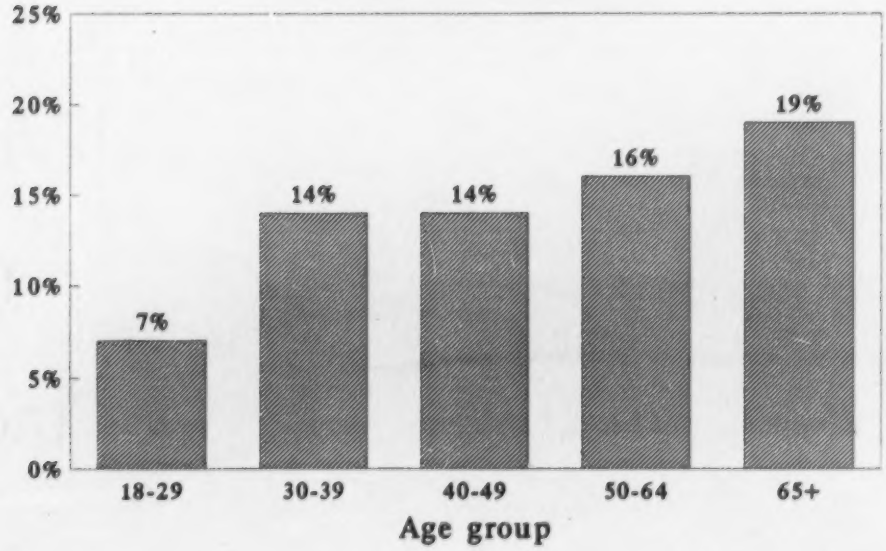
The overwhelming majority of people who buy and use OTC medicines read and understand the labels on these products. However, about 15 million OTC users ignore the label, and another 16 million say that when they do read the label, they don't understand it.

This lack of understanding--and the failure to ask for help--is highest among older people, precisely the group that has the heaviest use of OTC products. Clearly, these people should be the primary target for any educational campaign.

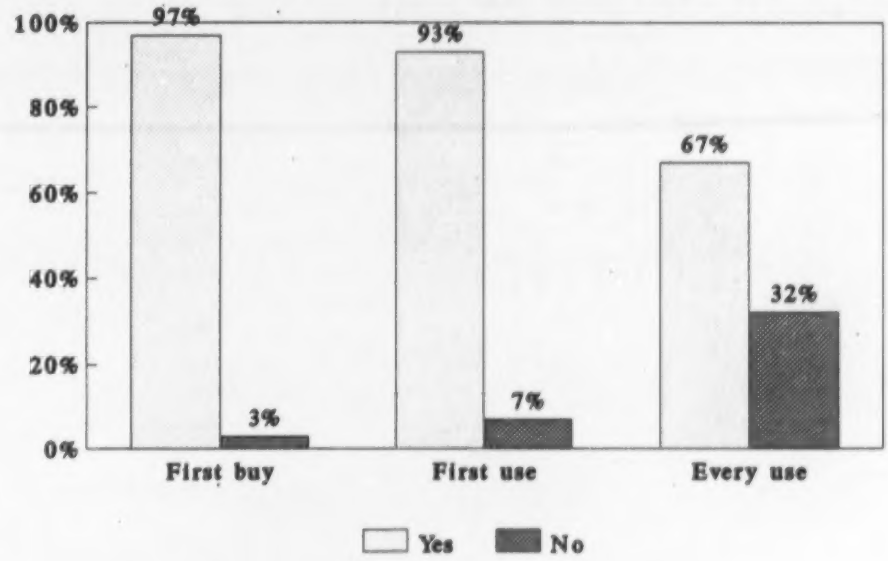
Use of OTC Medicines
1991



Use OTC Medicines Often
By age, 1991

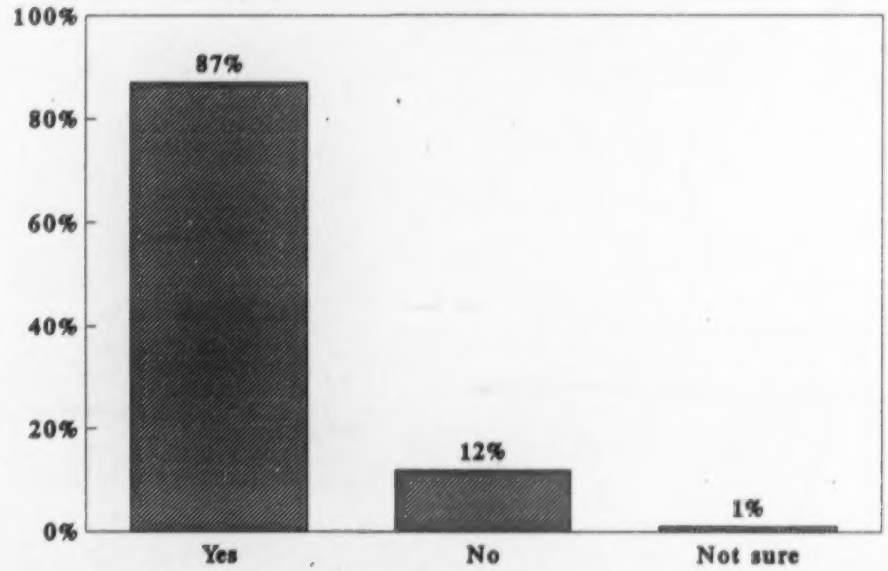


Time of Reading OTC Medicine Labels
1991



Base: People who read medicine labels.

Understand OTC Medicine Labels
1991



Base: People who read medicine labels.

Prescription Medicines

One hundred fifty-seven million Americans--85% of those aged 18 and over--say they buy prescription medicines. Twenty-two percent say they buy them often, 25 percent buy them occasionally, and 38 percent say they do so rarely. Fifteen percent say they never use them.

Groups most likely to report that they often take prescription drugs include Easterners (25%), women (28%, compared to 15% of men), and those over age 50 (38%, vs. 14% of those under age 50).

Reading prescription drug labels

Of people who purchase prescription medicines, 91 percent say they read the labels, a figure almost identical to that for OTC medications. Just nine percent report that they do not read the labels.

Label reading for prescription drugs is uniformly high across demographic groups, with men scoring nearly as high as women. Eighty-nine percent of men read these labels, compared to 93 percent of women. In fact, the lowest percentage of label readers--87 percent--is among people with an annual household income exceeding $50,000.

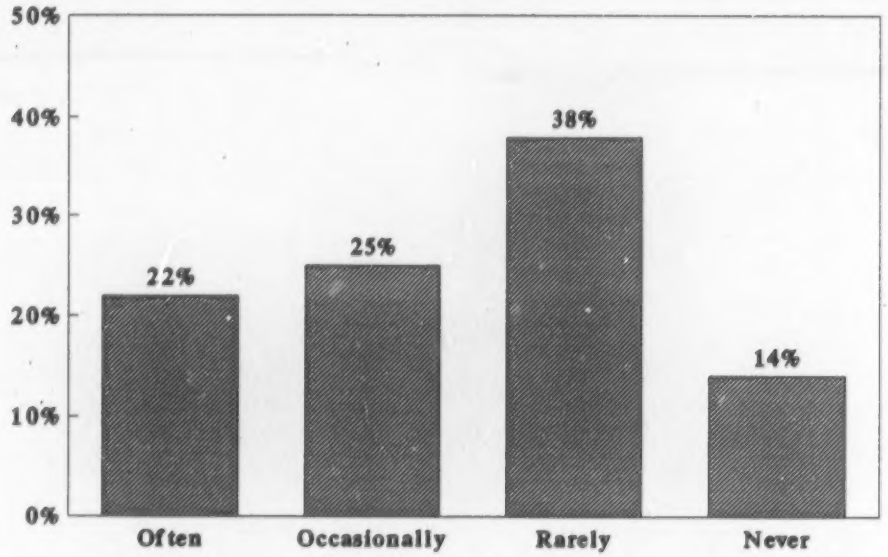
Understanding prescription drug labels

Nine out of 10 people--89 percent--who read the labels on prescription medicines say they usually understand the information. Ten percent say they usually do not understand it.

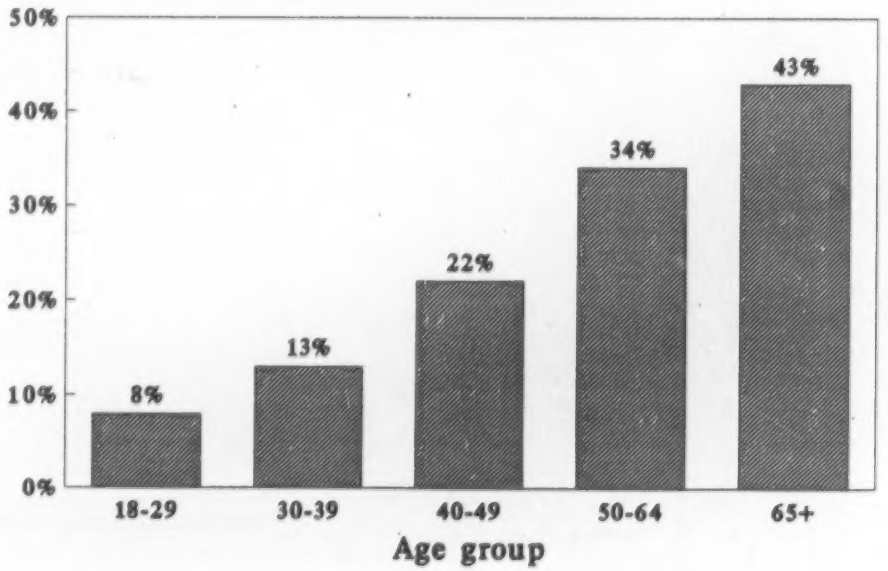
The highest level of understanding is among women (91%), those aged 40 to 49 (93%), people with some college experience or college degrees (92%), and those in households with $50,000+ annual income (95%). Misunderstanding is greatest among Easterners (14%), men (12%) and those without high school diplomas (16%).

The great majority of those who don't understand prescription medicine labels--83 percent--ask for help. Doctors are the source of information for 43 percent, pharmacists for 38 percent, and other family members for 18 percent.

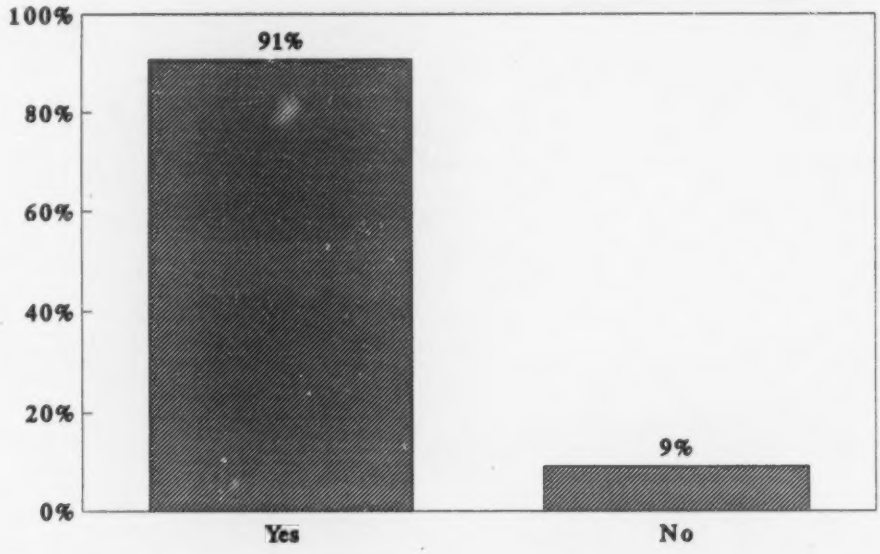
Use of Prescription Medicines
1991



Use Prescription Medicines Often
By age, 1991

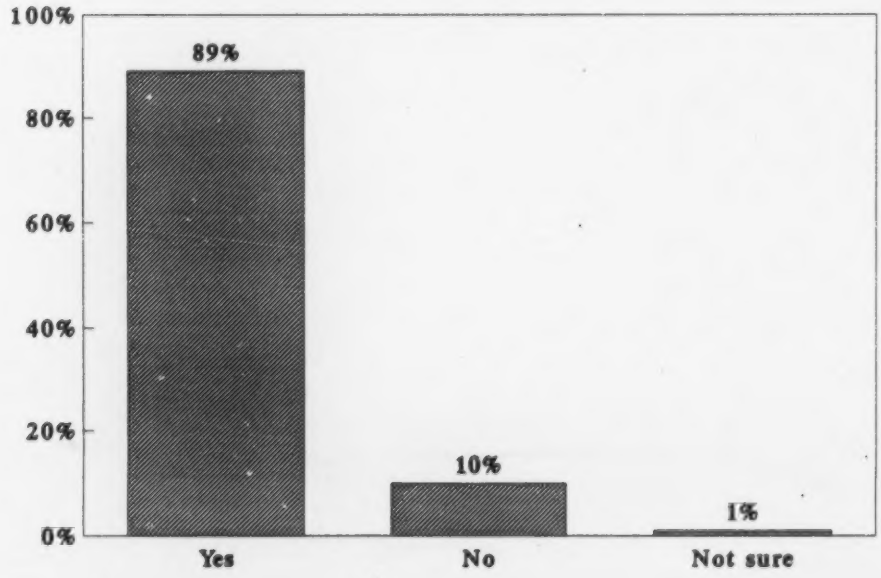


Read Prescription Medicine Labels
1991



Base: Have bought prescription medicine

Understand Prescription Medicine Labels
1991



Base: Read prescription medicine labels

Safe Use of Medicines

Discarding expired medicines

Before using drugs from their medicine cabinet, whether over-the-counter or prescription medications, 53 percent of adults say they always check for expiration dates. Another 24 percent report that they sometimes check, while 12 percent say they rarely do. Only nine percent say they never check the expiration date on medicines.

Women are more likely than men to always check the expiration date on medicines, by a 59 percent to 46 percent margin. Similarly, people over the age of 30 are more likely to check than those aged 18 to 29 (55% vs. 46%), and people with a high school education or less are more likely to check than those with some college experience or college graduates (56% vs. 50%).

Nearly everyone who checks drug expiration dates discards medicines if they are out-of-date. Ninety-one percent say they do this; nine percent say they don't. People across all demographic groups have similar high rates for disposing of expired medicines.

Tampering

The great majority of people who buy OTC drugs--91 percent--say they know what to look for as evidence of tampering. Only nine percent say they don't know what to look for.

While knowledge of tampering is widespread, women, people aged 30 to 64, and those with a high school or college education are slightly more likely to know what to look for.

Of the 91 percent of OTC users who say they can recognize tampering, 92 percent say they check their medications for tampering when they purchase them. Seven percent say they don't check.

Among the groups most likely to check for tampering are Southerners, women, people over age 65 and those without a high school diploma. The demographic differences, however, are quite minor.

These results show clearly that most Americans understand the issue of tampering and are alert to potential problems. However, about 23 million people who use OTC medications either don't know what to look for as evidence or don't bother to check. As a result, these people remain vulnerable to tampering.

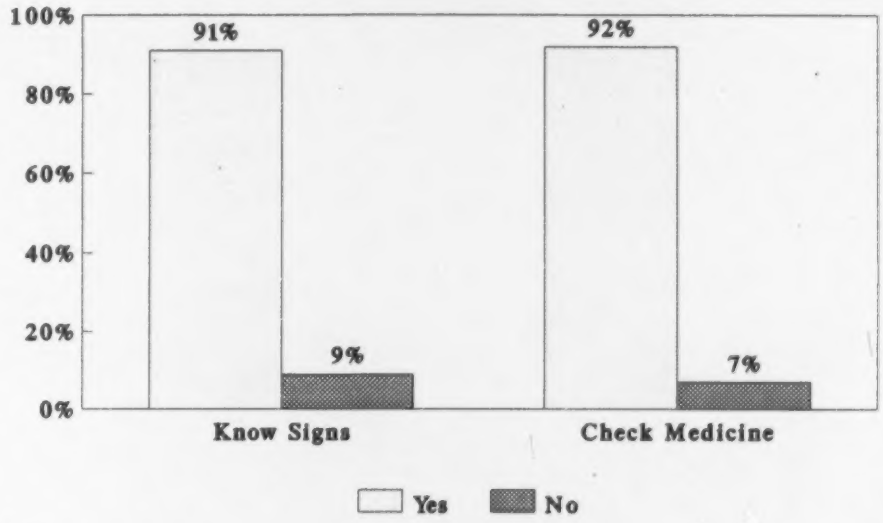
Use of other people's prescriptions

Twenty percent of American adults say that in the past five years they have used drugs prescribed for someone else. About one-third of these people say they have done so once, another third say they have done so twice, and the final third report three or more instances of using another person's prescription drugs.

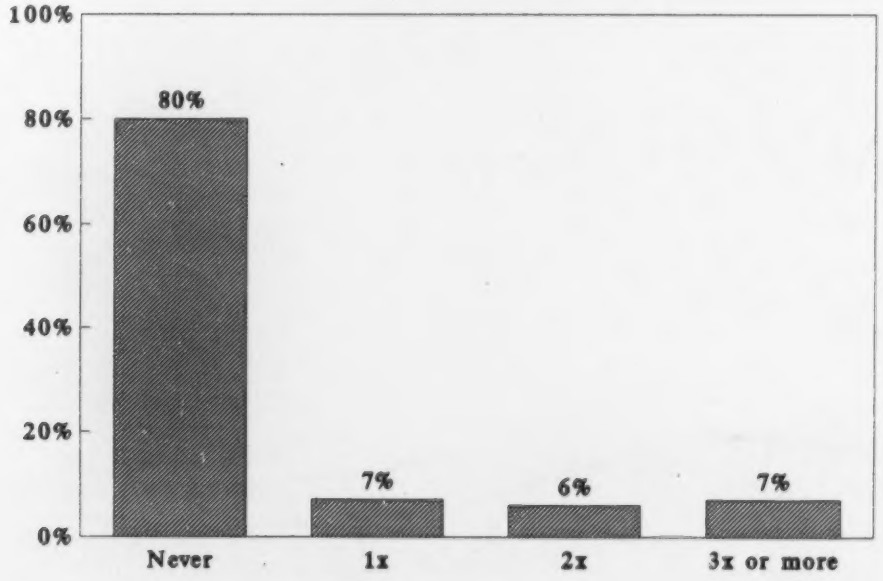
Groups most likely to take someone else's prescription drugs present a rather unusual mix: they include Southerners (23%), Westerners (25%), women (22%) and those in households with annual incomes above $50,000 (24%).

People with college degrees or some college experience are more likely to take drugs prescribed for someone else than those with only a high school education or less (24% vs. 16%), and people under age 50 are more than twice as likely as those over age 50 to do so (26% vs. 10%).

Tampering
1991



Used Someone Else's Prescription Drugs
1991



Notes on Survey Methods

The information in this report is based on interviews by Louis Harris & Associates, Inc., with 1,256 randomly selected adults in the continental United States. The interviews were conducted by telephone during November, 1991.

The Harris company breaks down the national sample by two dimensions: geographic region and metropolitan versus non-metropolitan residence. This ensures that the sample will reflect, within one percent, those living in different regions of the country and those in metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas.

In addition, these figures are weighted to the Census Bureau's latest population parameters on sex, race, age and income. This adjusts these key variables, where necessary, to their actual proportions in the population.

Sampling error

The results from a national survey are subject to sampling error. Sampling error is the difference between the results obtained from the sample and those that would have been obtained if the entire population had been surveyed.

For a survey of 1,256 people, the sampling error is plus/minus three percentage points in 95 out of 100 cases.